MONSTROUS EXISTENCE: A CRITICAL READING OF *NIGHT IN THE WOODS* THROUGH THE WORKS OF MARK FISHER

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I have always longed to be a part of the outward life, to be out there at the edge of things, to let the human taint wash away in emptiness and silence as the fox sloughs his smell into the cold unworldliness of water; to return to the town as a stranger.

— J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine*

PREFACE

Content Warning: It should be noted by the reader that this essay contains discussions of depression, anxiety, suicide, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, abuse, sexual assault, far-right political violence, religious themes, and the occult. It is acknowledged by the author that the subject of this analysis, *Night in the Woods*, was developed, in part, by a serial abuser whose offenses have been widely reported. It should also be noted that the primary interests of the analyses herein are the writing and themes portrayed in the game, rather than the gameplay programming and soundtrack for which the individual in question has been credited. For additional context regarding this matter, the reader may refer to writings by Benson, by Carpenter, by Gurley, and by Holowka, as cited below.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CR *Capitalist Realism*

WE *The Weird and the Eerie*

SUMMARY

This thesis presents a critical close reading of the 2017 videogame *Night in the Woods*, developed by independent studio Infinite Fall. Following literary critic Irving Howe's notion of the "political novel," this thesis demonstrates that *Night in the Woods* exists as a rare and audacious interrogation of Capital and its deleterious fallout in the rural United States. In order to make its case, this thesis heavily incorporates the critical vocabulary of the theorist Mark Fisher, whose notions of "capitalist realism," "the weird," and "the eerie" serve to identify explicitly and categorically much of what the game in question represents implicitly and aesthetically. Structurally, the thesis first explores the themes and political rhetoric of *Night in the Woods* via an analysis of the places and communities featured in the game's setting. Next, the thesis explores how such themes are internalized by the game's protagonist and thereby rendered to the player. Finally, contrasting the themes of the game to the definition of "horror" outlined by the philosopher Eugene Thacker, the thesis ends with a discussion of how *Night in the Woods* argues for genuine and political meaning in the face of a meaningless and incomprehensible universe.

CHAPTER ONE

Games, like other cultural works, don't exist apolitically. They're neither exterior to politics, nor are they insular to a world without them. As this becomes increasingly clear, we observe hints of desperation in the rhetoric and marketing of certain corporate game productions arguing for the contrary. Bobby Kotick, CEO of Activision Blizzard—the company behind the popcorn warfare *Call of Duty* franchise—recently attempted to wash his hands of the matter: "We're not the operator of the world's town halls. We're the operator of the communities that allow you to have fun through the lens of a video game" (see Gach). Some game developers are even more explicit. Regarding a recent post-apocalyptic *Tom Clancy* title set in war-torn Washington D.C., Terry Spier, creative director of Red Storm Entertainment, was quoted saying, "we're definitely not making any political statements. Right? This is still a work of fiction, right?" (see Hall) This perennial refrain—"it's just a game"—one imagines always, always, as if followed by a hip and genial, "man!" It remains the responsibility of critics to harsh this particular mellow.

The self-seriousness with which these defenses are deployed contradicts their intentions. Why bother to protest that something *isn't* actually the case, if not because it clearly appears to be—or worse, clearly is? The volley of discourse that so often results from this back-and-forth between critics and creators most often occurs on the courts of major franchises, such as those mentioned above. Store shelves, real and virtual, cycle through a yearly stock of game releases that plunder, for their thematic or situational inspiration, some unsettling period of history or any given theatre of our present Forever War.

Granted, this performance of public relations grows repetitive. If anything, it tends to result in free advertising for the franchise in question. But, on the bright side, perhaps we can acknowledge that discussions of the political and its relation to games—like the tips of the proverbial icebergs—tend in greater numbers to breach the surface of even the most mainstream criticism. A prime example: in 2016, games critic Austin Walker began his tenure as editor-in-chief at what is now *Vice Games* with an editorial in response to the election of Donald Trump. "Our aim," Walker wrote of the nascent site's priorities, "is to cover games with criticality and humanity. It is to give as much attention to the people, passion, and politics of gaming as we have been giving to the products." Walker wasn't alone in this mission. In no small part, the development of politically astute games criticism is due to the diversity of critical voices increasingly employed by a number of press outlets.

But no less important than the diversification of criticism is the contemporary democratization, so to speak, of the *means* of game production itself. It's never been easier for a single creator or a small team to make a game that strives to say something of genuine political import. Games, even video games, can nowadays be made in an afternoon, with little to no coding know-how; Anna Anthropy was writing about this phenomenon all the way back in 2012 with her book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*. Moreover, it's never been easier for those same visionaries to access the funds, the distribution platforms, and the audience necessary to do so. The web-based storefront Itch.io has become the games industry equivalent to independent music platforms like Soundcloud and Bandcamp. I don't mean to make any of this sound perfect, and least of all settled, but the circumstances are indeed different than they were even ten years ago—and in many ways they're better.

I mean to point out a difference, however, between a game that *has politics* and a game that *is political*. And in this regard, I'm building on a distinction outlined by the political theorist Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe defines "the political" as "the antagonistic dimension which is inherent to all human societies" (2). Because, she writes, "political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts," it's necessarily the case that "proper political questions always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives" (3). This uncentered, uncertain, and unending conflict of interests defines "the political" as the dominant mode or "dimension" of human activity. On the contrary, the word "politics," according to Mouffe, "refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of 'the political'" (3). In other words, "politics" is something like the ground-level manifestation of higher-order, *political* antagonism. Folks live together because of politics, in spite of their disagreements over the political.

Following this logic, all games, as products of culture and labor, *have politics*. That is, they're made in a time, in a place, and by people (or corporations) for other people (or publics) to play (or experience). Simply by virtue of the "practices, discourses and institutions" (Mouffe, 2) that went into their making, the politics of games are inherent, even if they aren't expressed. One can imagine a thorough inquiry into the politics of *Super Mario Bros*. (Nintendo, 1985) that has nothing to do with the Mushroom Kingdom, its monarch, or her mustachioed savior—but rather concerns itself with the impact of the game on Japanese and North American techno-entertainment economies.

On the other hand, a *political* game must be reckoned with, *politically*, through the interrogation of its aesthetic expression. One way to do so is to place the work in what Mouffe calls an emergent "dimension of antagonism" (3). Ask: What is the game saying, why and to whom? Clearly, not all games mean to represent a political perspective. Nonetheless—to the discredit of aforementioned corporate stakeholders who would claim otherwise—this fact does not imply that games universally express what their makers intend. Thus, to return to the above example, it would be perfectly fair to question how the naive adoption of the "save the princess" trope in *Super Mario Bros*. (Nintendo, 1985) developed into an early and influential instance of paradigmatic gender politics in game design.

To be sure, many games both *have politics* and *are*, intentionally or not, *political*. A smashingly successful military first-person-shooter set in the contemporary Middle East may be expressly *a*political, but its massive development costs would imply an underlying labor *politics*, just as its setting would surely express, one way or another, a specific *political* point of view. But just because we *can* fashion a political reading of any given game, doesn't mean that the reading will always bear fruit. *Marble Madness* (Atari Games, 1984)—an arcade game about navigating an orb around and out of a maze of pitfalls—may have been important both culturally and economically; but aesthetically, the game is more or less exactly what it appears to be: a simple topographic puzzle, the likes of which one might find in an old-timey gift shop. Uncovering the game's political implications would be a stretch, to say the least.

Given all of this, there remains a question about what to do with games that explicitly engage or contend with politics or the political via their unique aesthetic

expression. *What is a political game?* As luck would have it, we find precedent for answering this question in the broader realm of literary studies. Writing in the middle of the last century, literary critic Irving Howe described the "political novel" as a novel "in which *we take to be dominant* political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and, it follows, with the possibility of some analytical profit" (17). The critical "taking" of political ideas to be dominant, for Howe, is a hedging of unequivocal dominance in light of what we have already discussed: the potential for political ideas to crop up where they weren't authorially intended. So long as "the relation between politics and literature" as it is expressed in a work "is interesting enough to warrant investigation," Howe argues that, by way of shorthand, we may consider said work a *political novel* (17).

Moreover, since the novel is, in a generic respect, a literary exploration of the internality of character, Howe writes that the political novel is typically one in which "the *idea* of society, as distinct from the mere unquestioned workings of society, has penetrated the consciousness of the characters," (19) such that, at the height of the political novel's powers, "the ideas it appropriates are melted into its movement and fused with the emotions of its characters" (21). Howe's subsequent choices of case study surely enough exemplify his theoretical definitions: Dostoevsky, Conrad, James, Orwell, etc. In these works we find characters from whose idiosyncratic ideologies their authors compose veritable symphonies of thought. Harmony and discord!

Games, no less than novels—and in their infancies similarly spurned—hold the potential to meld the political with the aesthetic. For the aforementioned reasons, this field is alive and growing. As access to game-making toolsets expands to broader and broader

audiences, so grow the affordances of those toolsets for creators at smaller and smaller scales. Once a rarity, or at least an oddity, singular creative expression, quite novelistic in its method, is increasingly common. A game maker wants to say something, makes a game, and thereby says it. This is good for political games—for games that *have something political to say*. (To say nothing of the critical profit that rides along in the wake of such works.) The analysis that follows is a close reading of one recent independent game that—via a nuanced narrative in equal parts quotidian and chthonic—stands out as a rare and explicit critique of Capital, and its deleterious fallout in the rural United States. It is a game about the meaning that can be made from and the life that must be lived in a haunted ruin. Co-written by Scott Benson and Bethany Hockenberry, the game in question is called *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall, 2017).

Night in the Woods is a narrative adventure game developed by one-off three-person studio, Infinite Fall. The game features a quirky, storybook art style that can hardly go unnoticed upon first impression. Lush autumn-afternoon oranges mix with foreboding blues in a way that makes nearly every screenshot sing. Animations are simple, but expressive—lowkey, but filled with little details, like leaves that flutter through the wind as the player-character flits across the screen. The characters of the game's world are all represented as anthropomorphic animals: think Disney, but disaffected—wide-eyed with what the game's artist describes as "the catatonic stare" of the early Richard Scarry's illustrated townsfolk (see Ewert-Krocker). The protagonist and her parents are cats; her best friends are a fox, an alligator, a bear, and a bird. This aesthetic choice is taken for granted. No mention of anyone's species is made, nor ever is an explanation given of the other, non-sapient furry critters wandering the setting's autumnal streets. For all intents

and purposes, the cast is comprised of human folks, just like us, who only happen to look different.

Night in the Woods takes place in Possum Springs, a formerly prosperous mining community that has fallen on hard times. Unions went on strike, were busted; businesses moved and the mines were closed; the floods hit hard. The town has struggled and struggles still. Its cause may very well be long lost. The player takes on the role of Mae Borowski, a young woman returning here—to her hometown—after suddenly dropping out of her sophomore year of college. The game takes place over the first few days of her return.

Every morning, Mae wakes up in her childhood bed, restless from one of her increasingly vivid supernatural dreamscapes. She can check the instant messenger app on her computer, head into town to chat down locals with actual responsibilities, or pop in on one of her now (un)gainfully employed old pals. This last activity presents to the player the greatest opportunity to affect the development of the plot. At the end of most days—as determined, not by a running clock, but rather by the onset of the player's own boredom—Mae can ask each of her closest friends what their plans are that evening, and, subtly or not, invite herself to tag along. In this manner, for instance, one is given the choice, within a single playthrough of the game, of looting the junkyard for a broken-down animatronic with Gregg the anarcho-punk fox, or meandering around the dilapidated shopping mall with Bea the chain-smoking, goth alligator. Each option—each "friend date"—is generally exclusive of the others. You can't please everyone. At least, on one playthrough.

Soon enough, Mae begins to realize that her old friends have grown up without her. She has been left behind. And she can't seem to catch up. A few days into her return, on

the night of the annual Harvest Festival, Mae happens to witness a kidnapping, later becoming convinced that a ghostly presence is both responsible and related to her increasingly vivid psychic dreamscapes. Mae convinces her friends to investigate the disappearance after her desperate reports of the incident to her aunt, a local cop, go unheeded. Who would've guessed, but the gang chances upon the existence of a secretive, sacrificial cult of worshipers to a cosmic horror lurking at the bottom of an endless mineshaft.

At this juncture, by setting up and then weaving out of the cliched deployment of Lovecraftian tropes, the game's politics sharpen. The cult, it turns out, is comprised of local good-ol' boys, and a few old men, trying to do right by their community the only way they see fit. For generations, they've sacrificed to their vile god all those they consider worthless in life. These poor souls are cast, without remorse, into the pit. The cultists pray that, in recognition of their deeds, the Thing in the mine—Black Goat, as they call it—will by its great power return Possum Springs to its former All-American glory. Indeed, they want to Make Possum Springs Great Again. "The politics of the game became more overt as we went," notes Scott Benson, the game's co-writer, in one pre-release interview (see Ewet-Krocker). Perhaps intentionally, this late-game plot twist echoes the murderous small-town cult of the Greater Good as featured in the 2007 buddy-cop farce *Hot Fuzz*; but in this case—in part, because of the medium at work and, in part, because of the mid-2010s political climate into which the game was released—the central critique levelled by *Night in the Woods* remains meaningfully distinct. In conclusion, following a last-act confrontation, Mae and her pals barely escape, inadvertently manage to trap the cultists in

a mine collapse, and reconvene the next day for band practice. Things are bad; at least they've got each other, but now what? Credits roll.

Having described the game's narrative, we can turn to extant critical work through which it can be examined. Most notably, one finds something of a startling resemblance—uncanny, really, in more ways than one—between the themes of *Night in the Woods* and the themes recurrent in the theoretical work of Mark Fisher. In fact, so clear is this thematic kinship that Scott Benson—again, the game's co-writer—recently (and it must be said, after this essay was first drafted) had this to say on Twitter (@bombsfall): "For various reasons I've been back in the NITW headspace lately and approaching it years later I'm kind of amazed I hadn't read Mark Fisher before we made that game. I only got around to reading Capitalist Realism last year." Even setting aside the potentially fallacious resort to authorial intent (admittedly reassuring, though it is!), the work of Mark Fisher—and not just *Capitalist Realism*—serves to unpack explicitly and theoretically much of what *Night in the Woods* represents implicitly and aesthetically. Therefore, it's to our benefit to engage with it, that we may best come to an understanding of the political expression that remains our aim.

First, some background. The work of Mark Fisher, an academic scholar as well as a prodigious blogger, emerged in an era when blogging still meant something—or better yet, when no one quite knew what blogging was supposed to mean. Fisher's blog, *k-punk,* took its initialism from the Greek *kybernetes*, the word for a ship's helmsman from which "cybernetics" was originally formed. This anachronistic twist on "cyberpunk" is the factoid that begins many a subsequent piece of reflective writing on Fisher's career. Writes Hua Hsu for the *New Yorker*, "it was intended to signal his interest in a time before the rise of

the sort of cyber boosterism that Fisher associated with *Wired* magazine. Punk, for Fisher, was a way of being and seeing that involved a refusal of things as they were."

The next development to be mentioned in Fisher's biographical overview is to refer to the writer's passing away just before the publication of his book *The Weird and the Eerie*. Writes Megan Day for *Jacobin*, "Fisher didn't live to see anything like a revolution. But his work contains blueprints for a new generation of socialists, tens of thousands of whom have been energized—in the US, in his native UK, and around the world—since his suicide in January 2017." The manuscript of what was to become his next book, *Acid Communism*, was gathered alongside a summation of his blogging output in a two-and-a-half pound volume of collected work, released the following year (see *K-Punk*).

However, what may be the definitive, or at least the clearest, expression of Fisher's peculiar outlook on what's generally and generously called Late Capitalism comes in the form of his first book, *Capitalist Realism*, subtitled, *Is There No Alternative?* The book (hereafter cited in-text as *CR*) charts an interrogation of the forms and furrows of Capital, likening it, in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari, to a shapeless and lurking monster (*CR*, 5). Capital, for Fisher, is something we can never behold in full. Rather, we sense it like a "pervasive atmosphere" (*CR*, 16)—and like our natural atmosphere, it comes to disappear for us. The "centerlessness" (*CR*, 64) of Capital precludes it from taking any kind of responsibility. Consequently, it displaces the ire of a working class that supports it upon certain individuals they hold to be at fault for their troubles. Like, for instance, cultists eager to toss folks into a pit. Fisher describes the problem like so: "it is only individuals that can be held ethically responsible for actions, and yet the cause of these abuses and errors is corporate" (*CR*, 69).

The disappearing act of Capital becomes Fisher's main target. The book's eponym, "capitalist realism," is Fisher's term for the aforementioned atmosphere that makes it—as Fisher quotes in attribution to *both* Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek—"easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (*CR*, 2). The ideas expressed in the book aren't radically unprecedented, nor are they advertised to be; they instead comprise a cogent and expressive levelling of various postmodern critical theories. But upon these is founded a critique equally remarkable for its dextrous esotericism as for its deeply personal stake in the matter. With *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher clearly intends not just to outline for us the shape of oppression, but to call to our collective attention to the strain and injuries the system inflicts upon us, upon our minds, and upon our mental health. Fisher writes that "the task of repoliticizing mental illness is an urgent one" (*CR*, 37). To deny the social-economic influence of Capital on society's mental health is, according to Fisher, to give Capital exactly what it wants: more individuals to blame, more outs to disappear into.

But whereas *Capitalist Realism* focuses on the consequences—physical and mental—of Capital, Fisher's later work, *The Weird and the Eerie* (hereafter cited in-text as *WE*) seeks to investigate the affects through which it is channelled, and likewise the modes by which it can be expressed and resisted. Put differently, *Capitalist Realism* shows us a monster. *The Weird and the Eerie* shows us where, in our minds, the monster hunts. Fisher's definitions of the weird and the eerie refer to a variety of phenomena. Among them: genres of fiction, literary styles, affects, atmospheres, and forms of inquiry in their own right. Above all, however, the weird and the eerie are "modes of being" (*WE,* 9). That is—although Fisher doesn't immediately jump to this word—they are *ontologies* which we both outwardly recognize and ourselves embody.

But how do I know if a feeling is weird, or if it's eerie? In Fisher's particular terms, what do these words really mean? The weird is "*that which does not belong*" (*WE,* 10). This is simple enough to understand; but it can also mean that which, in our limited and fallible capacities, we only *think* does not belong (*WE*, 15). The eerie is somewhat more complex. It is a kind of uncertainty "constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*" (*WE,* 61). Fisher explains in other words: "The eerie concerns the most fundamental metaphysical questions one could pose, questions to do with existence and non-existence: *Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here with there should be something?*" (*WE,* 12) Furthermore, for the sake of additional uncertainty, the questions of the eerie extend well into the metaphysical realm of will and agency. "What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all?" (*WE,* 11)

Connecting the two works, *Capitalist Realism* and *The Weird and the Eerie,* is a shared vocabulary. In the latter, Fisher writes, "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nonetheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (*WE,* 11). In the former: "The most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us" (*CR,* 15). Using this vocabulary, we can approach *Night in the Woods* from an appropriate critical and theoretical angle. First, by examining its critique of capital through the places and people native to its setting. And second, by doing the same for the internal struggle of its protagonist. Finally, we can expand out from the limits of a single theoretical framework and into an adjacent one—namely, that of horror—in order to answer the question of what *Night in the Woods* makes of its own political assertions.

CHAPTER TWO

One of the benefits of making a game with a small team is that the product is perhaps more likely to appear authorially authentic. All the more easily we slip into the lie that is the melding of minds between creator and audience—author and reader. The smaller the team, even down to a single person, the better the odds are at hitting upon the *real deal*, the auteur at the heart of the work. The author we bring back to life in the text. Literary fiction more or less lost the battle with the auteur ever since Homer was imagined to be a living, breathing, and stunningly imaginative individual. Likewise, this late into its lifespan, cinema appears to be stuck with the image of the auteur director, the one who sees their singular vision through every phase of the project, in and out of the perspectives of dozens or hundreds of technicians and artists. Games—in large part, albeit with a few exceptions (see, for instance, Park's *Washington Post* piece on Hideo Kojima)—have, rather unconsciously, avoided this particular brand of idolatry. At the same time, what's been lost in the shuffle to avoid auteurship, unconscious though it may have been, is precisely the kind of personal context that auteur criticism helps to unearth. The auteur, even in its most egregious mischaracterizations, can be a patently useful fiction for understanding where something comes from, even if it doesn't, or rather can't, tell the whole story itself.

As part of the virtual press tour that tends to accompany the release of a hotly anticipated indie game, the onus apparently fell upon Scott Benson to give a number of interviews from which we now have the luxury of taking some key contextual information.

In one such interview with Winnie Song, Benson goes into detail about the lived experiences that inspired the game:

> I live in Pittsburgh where it's a shell of the steel industry. Where my wife is from is just mill towns and mining towns that have closed. I'd love to make something that is based on living in a place like that. Not just the trauma of it closing, but about the kids that grow up in the shadow of that, and what it means to live in these towns where there are amazing buildings that are crumbling because they were built back when people had money. And no one has any money, and no one comes down the main street anymore because they built a highway nearby.

Night in the Woods, it would seem, is very much the game Benson would love to make—even if rural Pennsylvania is masked as Possum Springs, and Pennsylvanians themselves are masked as storybook animals. So far so good.

In another interview with the (apparently now defunct) games outlet ZAM (see Ewert-Krocker via the Internet Archive), Benson discusses the phrase at which he arrived in order to describe the sentiment and aesthetic described above: "Rust Belt Gothic." Novel in its own right though it may be to pitch a game by referencing a twentieth-century literary genre, "Rust Belt Gothic" is more than just a catchy phrase. Taking inspiration from the Southern Gothic tradition, Benson describes his intention to evoke the older genre's unique form of hollow nostalgia—in his words, "this kind of spirit of the past that you can't get rid of or you have to confront, and is [sic] victimizing younger people in the present" (see Ewet-Krocker). Above other influences, Benson notes in the same interview that Flannery O'Connor stands out in particular. He describes the "hella Catholic" writer's search for the

"absent" "organizing force" of God as being the basis for the spiritual and political struggle at the heart of *Night in the Woods*. Benson, to Ewet-Krocker:

> Whereas the older Gothic is the decline of these hierarchical systems of lords, castles, manors, monarchs, and stuff (and to a degree the church as the nineteenth century drew to a close), Rust Belt Gothic [is about] economics. It's extremely materialist, at least in our view of it. In the hands of someone who just found that aesthetic interesting, it could be horrible; it could just be a lot of ruin porn. "They had jobs, and then they didn't, and now everyone's depressed." But I think that in the hands of people who are from there, or who have lived there for a long time and have a love for it, you can get a lot of fun stuff with it.

I quote these sections in full to underscore the fact that Capital and labor are essential and intentional thematic concerns of *Night in the Woods*. The game is made by people from a place with things to say about that place. It's therefore explicitly political, even on its most superficial layer. Nonetheless, in spite of our faith in the fact that it must be saying *something*, our mere acknowledgement of these verifiable concerns won't get us much closer to understanding what *Night in the Woods* is actually has to say.

Here's where Fisher's work becomes especially useful. The Gothic precedent of thematic engagement with Capital and labor brings us right back around to notions of the weird and the eerie. *Things that don't belong*. *Something where there should be nothing, or nothing where there should be something*. To this point, I quote Fisher regarding the work of the pioneering author of weird (and no less eerie) fiction. "[H. P.] Lovecraft's stories are obsessively fixated on the question of the outside: an outside that breaks through

in encounters with anomalous entities from the deep past, in altered states of consciousness, in bizarre twists in the structure of time" (*WE,* 16). In many ways, this summation reads like a checklist of the thematic priorities of *Night in the Woods*—so strange is the game's own reckoning with the "anomalous entity" of Capital itself: the horror in the mine, Black Goat. But let's start instead at the very beginning. What follows is a description of what happens for the player immediately upon starting a new game. It's a curious and somewhat alienating beginning, nonetheless solidified by a strong thematic foundation.

A black screen. Autumn wind shudders through the brittle leaves of unseen trees. Whispery white text fades in on the left side of the screen—"In the year Granddad died"—this fragment: an offset, solitary introduction to the offset, solitary world of *Night in the Woods*. Following the instruction of the lone indicator at the bottom of the screen, the player presses the requisite button on their controller or keyboard and the proceeding line fades in just as softly, itself indented further into the void. What has emerged, the player realizes, is the next line of a poem. "The highway extension came". But alongside this line are arrows. Moving directionally left or right offers the player a choice: either the aforementioned retelling or a parallel correlative. "We had the worst flood since 1998."

Regarding the narrative in progress, via this first decision, the player falls into a position which is decidedly *strange*. The strange, as Fisher reminds us, is a common ground between the weird and the eerie; it is the result of a "fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience" (*WE,* 8). Here, standards of consequence are murky. If the player chooses one, will the other still have happened? (This is, already, an eerie question of agency.) Minutes into the narrative proper, the answer is revealed to be yes. But, even knowing this, the hint of responsibility is tough to ignore.

The player is present, complacent, even participant, in the downfall of a small town—one as of yet virtually unknown. And that downfall has to have happened one way, or the other. Maybe one resonates with the player. Maybe one hits, literally, close to home.

After a decision has been made, the consequent stanza progresses across four lines indented even deeper into the black. The first variant reads:

In the year Granddad died

the highway extension came

the road through Possum Springs

had been the only way to the state park

the highway took the traffic

but gave us Donut Wolf

The other:

In the year Granddad died

we had the worst flood since 1998

Gregg got trapped on top of a dog house

the power was out for two days

Casey Hartley came by in his dad's boat

and I laughed when I saw him

Who's Gregg? What's a "Donut Wolf"? Details have been sowed for the harvest of hindsight. When the player finally meets Gregg, they might think to themselves, as if seeing an old friend, "Gregg!" The Donut Wolf will later appear with a gravity unearned by its silly name alone. And, upon finding pinned to a bulletin board one of dozens of MISSING flyers for Casey Hartley (the reader of this essay can imagine, by now, in whose clutches he ends up), the player may just distantly remember an incident involving a boat—and a flood. *Night in the Woods* is a game about nostalgia. But nostalgia is a tricky thing in which to involve the necessarily alien mentality of an interactive player. None of this is the player's history, after all. Thus, to the problem of how to foster for this player—and for the first-time player, especially—an impression of the nostalgia so deeply felt by its protagonist, this introductory poem works as an effective solution. By way of its idiosyncratic form of exposition, its import lodges in the memory.

"Grandad left me an apple crate of books," the poem continues. "He loved ghost stories / and quoted them to himself in the hospital bed". The quotations that make up the next few lines of the poem are in the player's partial control. It would appear that, having graduated from the concrete historicism of the previous choice, the player is now primed to tackle a more abstract dilemma. Quotes are important, the player may think to themselves; maybe this will be some kind of secret password to keep in mind for later. (Not the case. Not that kind of adventure game. But nonetheless, not to be forgotten.) Options: "'They went looking for the gods," how Gothic. "'In their wings, in their trees," a little less dramatic, but prettier. "'They feared death," is the last in the order—the most immediately prescient.

But the quotation marks don't close at the end of the selected line. What sort of poet doesn't know what the conclusion to a phrase is going to be before it's written? (A poet of a certain sort.) By this point, the player isn't defining setting—or at least, their understanding of it—but something trickier to nail down: characterization. Characterization, that is, both of the dying man and of the speaker recounting this strange verse. What did he say? What do I remember? More eerie questions. Another weird position to be in. No matter the choice, the theme remains constant in the subsequent lines. Respectively: "And died in lonely places.'" "All things die, be at peace.'" "So they ate the young.'"

A pattern emerges from this moment of play, one comprised of three big steps. Context. Choice. Consequence. It's a familiar pattern to most players, but it's one on which *Night in the Woods* offers variation after variation. The implications of this pattern run deep. Structurally, where the game is happy to offer choice, it's less generous—in most ways to its benefit—with consequences. Its prime directive is rarely reactivity for its own sake. As we see in the example immediately above, no matter the player's decision, an essential theme unites each consequence to its siblings. Here, and elsewhere throughout the game, that theme is death. In almost any given situation in *Night in the Woods*, the discrete choice of the player represents less of a deciding factor in some procedural calculus and more of an angle of affective approach—oblique or direct as necessary. Do we want to move toward death on our own terms, or through God? Choices *A*, *B*, or *C* lead, respectively, to *D*, *D'*, or *D''*.

The final choice of the poem is predicated on the very moment of death. "On his last day" the speaker's grandfather sits up "suddenly" in bed and gazes "bug-eyed" out the

window. What is he staring at? Whether the player chooses the playground, the parking lots, the trains, or the empty mill determines, as have the previous choices, the couple of indented lines that directly follow. But—in keeping with our understanding of the holistic mechanism of the game—this choice does not determine the final stanza, which reads, its implications ringing in the ears of the player for some time to come, invariably:

he turned to my dad

eyes still wide

“this house is haunted”

he said

and died.

Following the next button press—its affective and thematic register established—the game properly begins. The very next thing the player sees is their avatar: a wide-eyed cat, anthropomorphic but not quite cute, with one ragged ear, and a shock of dyed red fur-hair. She expresses in monologue something of a cheery sardonicism for having expected her parents, nowhere to be seen, to pick her up from the bus station at which the player is introduced to her. Mae Borowski has just dropped out of her sophomore year of college and is back in her hometown of Possum Springs. The player has, borrowing a sentiment from one of the game’s promotional trailers, “come home” (see “Night In The Woods Trailer”). But why not have the game just start here? What has the *poem* done for our player that the game’s typical mode of interaction could not?

Fisher writes that the weird and the eerie both make a similarly *strange* move, that "they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" (*WE,* 10). If indeed all players are outsiders to whatever we would call the interior of a game or its narrative, then they are on some level aliens by definition. But the strange poetics of the stanzas described above do more than make explicitly alienated the relationship between player and game (as has, at this point, proved a cliche in itself). The verses that begin *Night in the Woods* unsettle. They estrange both in the moment and over the course of the game by outright virtue of their ethereal and asynchronous exteriority. They evoke a "weird" which acts as a perfect introduction to "that which does not belong," (*WE,* 10), namely, to Mae herself. The poem does not just represent the outside of *Night in the Woods*, it constitutes it.

Now that the player is actually in Possum Springs, they soon come to realize that the place itself is weird! The game's first conversation occurs between Mae and the bus station's janitor who disappears without a trace as soon as Mae turns her back. (The janitor reappears a few more times throughout the game, under increasingly uncanny circumstances—and increasingly under Mae's suspicion of his apparently supernatural abilities.) As a weird small town, Possum Springs exists—quite apparently, for the pop culturally cognizant player—within a lineage of strange little American villages and townships from other works and worlds of fiction. *Twin Peaks* a 1990 television show by David Lynch and Mark Frost provides the most obvious touchstone. Upon its arrival, *Twin Peaks* founded a visual and narrative idiolect by which small-town Americana would be forever after filtered through the quaint, the quirky, and the supernatural. Its influence, equally referential and reverential, continues right down to a kind of binomial nomenclature of spooky towns: Bright Falls in the videogame *Alan Wake* (Remedy

Entertainment, 2010), Gravity Falls in the children's TV show of the same name (Hirsch, 2012), Greenvale in the videogame *Deadly Premonition* (Access Games, 2010), and of course Possum Springs. (Although, it must be said that Sleepy Hollow [see Irving] may very well have initiated the trend.) The eponymous one-horse, Washington-state town of Twin Peaks comes to be known by audiences for its Douglas fir, for its cherry pie, and for being the site of an eternal battle between cosmic entities of unimaginable power: the White Lodge and the Black Lodge. One Black Lodge spirit in particular, the show's antagonist BOB (Frank Silva), is responsible for the assault and murder of one Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), a highschool student whose death brings eccentric FBI agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) to town.

Twin Peaks—even given all the dream sequences and cryptic dialogue, even given its soap operatics, even given the (intentional and unintentional) tonal inconsistencies brought about by its troubled production history—maintains a dreadful symmetry between its mundane and supernatural evils. The Black Lodge demons have little to do with the town's drug rings, which prey on highschool students. Nor with the sex trafficking operation that takes place across its Canadian border. And even when demonic entities do directly intervene into human affairs, they do so in ways that horrifically reflect reality. Laura Palmer wasn't sexually assaulted and murdered by BOB acting as a disembodied spirit. Rather, she was sexually assaulted and murdered by her own father, Leland (Ray Wise), who himself suffered the assaults and abuses of possession by BOB from a young age. For all its charming antics, *Twin Peaks* eventually reveals itself to be a story about abuse, power, and evil.

For this reason, many fans of the original series harbored disdain for director David Lynch's cryptic 1992 cinematic prequel, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. This film, originally the first of a planned trilogy, removes nearly all of the small-town hijinks audiences had come to expect from the show. Lynch's camera focuses instead on the masterful performance of Sheryl Lee, who portrays Laura Palmer through her last weeks of life. In recent years, the film has received critical reappraisal, especially in light of 2017's 18-part television "limited event" *Twin Peaks: The Return*, which similarly made clear that *Twin Peaks* had always been an exploration of tragedy and dread.

Like the pastoral setting of *Twin Peaks* before it, the essential unease of Possum Springs concerns (as Fisher writes of Lovecraft) the terrifying implications of "the opposition between the quotidian and the numinous" (30). Possum Springs hides secrets. It hides them in the mines that used to make its fortune. Once the search for Capital that kept it fed had disappeared, the thing in the pit grew hungry. The violence that had once been contained belowground began to seep onto the surface. Cultic worship began, first to keep it sated, to prevent it from bringing about disaster—but later, to make it happy, to convince it to make things right. The secret rule of the Black Goat began.

In the Lovecraftian tradition, the Black Goat at the heart of Possum Springs would be considered akin to an "Old God," a cosmic being of unimaginable power—one for whom even the deific epithet of "god" is not just wishful, but woefully incommensurate. As Fisher writes of their iterations throughout the corpus, "human attempts to transform the alien entities into gods are clearly regarded by Lovecraft as vain acts of anthropomorphism, perhaps noble but ultimately absurd efforts to impose meaning and sense onto the 'real externality' of a cosmos in which human concerns, perspectives and

concepts have only a local reference" (*WE*, 18). To wit, these things aren't mere gods; gods we understand too well. This is the crux of so-called weird fiction. The idea of a black hole, Fisher notes, is actually far weirder than the idea of a vampire: the latter operates via well-understood rules and remains comfortingly supernatural, whereas the former is both little understood and yet as natural as a calm summer rain (*WE*, 15). Old Gods are the black holes of Lovecraftian fiction; they are terrors in the ether and disinterested reminders of our station.

In most cases, then, the narrative deification of the Old Gods has more to do with the traditional worship of the entity in question than with its natural existence. Lovecraft tends to examine this dichotomy linguistically; his cosmic horrors go by various names, some older than others. For instance, Lovecraft's own Black Goat of the Woods is elsewhere identified as Shub-Niggurath (see, in the Lovecraft collection cited below, "The Whisperer in Darkness"). In the broader "mythos," as the body of original works by Lovecraft and their various derivatives are collectively called, worship of the Old Gods occurs through cultic practices. Most of these cults are secret, or are otherwise—in contrast to the one featured in *Night in the Woods*—geographically and culturally remote from the anglophone purview of most of Lovecraft's protagonists. Cults exist, for Lovecraft, to be discovered, for their dark purposes to be made terribly clear, for the instruments of their doomed worship—idols, effigies, and sacrificial altars—to be unearthed, and for their respective deities to drive a WASPy academic to maddening confrontation with what Fisher describes as "an egress between this world and others" (*WE*, 19), or with traumatic "ruptures in the very fabric of experience itself" (*WE*, 22).

But let's not mince words: the Lovecraftian occult is outwardly and alarmingly orientalist and racist. Its fears are fears of difference, plain and simple. Its outsides are indeed the outsides of existence, but they are also the outsides of particular, situated existences. Its exoticism doesn't by chance happen to be the very exoticism of the imperial west, with its dark continents, its pagan rituals, and its fears of miscegenation. Because much of Lovecraft's work has passed into the public domain, recapitulations of his work are eminently popular. But to a greater or lesser degree, many Lovecraftian derivations unfortunately replicate these same biases. Simply remove them, and one also removes much that is integral to Lovecraft. Delicate surgery is necessary to save anything worth saving. Even etymologically speaking, the fear of the alien is difficult to decouple from the very notion of *xeno-phobia*. Thus, to meaningfully adapt Lovecraftian tropes today requires a kind of careful reflexivity that acknowledges the prejudices of their origin. It isn't enough to use them in earnest. In so doing, an artist runs the risk of letting a dead man's looming biases consume the work from the jump. *The Ballad of Black Tom,* a novella by Victor LaValle, for instance, recasts the Lovecraft story of "The Horror at Red Hook" from the perspective of a black Brooklynite—a person in whom the original story placed the very center of an existential threat to society at large. In revising and revitalizing this tale, LaValle's novella both uses and reflects upon the tropes that inspire it. This is, to be clear, something of a classic rhetorical move of postmodern fiction. With Lovecraft, however, it becomes all but necessary.

In its deployment of Lovecraftian tropes, *Night in the Woods* is similarly cognizant. The cult of the Black Goat is comprised not of foreigners and their strange religions, but of working-class xenophobes themselves: Rust Belt right-wingers by any other name and

wearing sillier hats. Their god is a corrupt incarnation of Capital to whom they feed those they consider useless or undesirable. Their goal is markedly anti-revolutionary. They do not seek, like so many of Lovecraft's cults, to birth into the world the terrible dominion of their god. Rather, they seek to maintain a certain status quo—better yet, to reclaim the status quo of greatness they feel has been unjustly taken from them—taken from them by whom else but the very souls they feed and feed and feed into the pit. *Night in the Woods* doesn't directly confront the issue of race, but the position of the cultists with regard to it is fairly clear. They witness an *us* that is eternally opposed to a *them*. "The Hartley kid?" One of the cult members asks Mae during their final confrontation, meaning Casey. "All he was gonna contribute to society, 'cept a buncha kids growin up with no dad, was a rap sheet a mile long, before whatever sat end he'd wind up at. We did him a favor." Gregg, who had until now held out hope for his friend's safety, is the first to reply. "You killed Casey."

To drive home the point of the cult's pessimistic and desperate desire to appease a Capital Old One that clearly has no interest in their whims, I quote, in full, the final monologue of the cult's leader, delivered—orated—to Mae and her friends as they stand, against the cultists, at opposite ends of the pit itself.

> We lost what our world was built around, used to be you provided for a family, bought a house, now you're stockin' shelves at the grocery store, kids leavin' more than they're stayin… No opportunity here. Old people dyin', houses left empty, ever seen that? A *home* become a tumbled-in pile of wood and plaster? A *job* become a burned out brick box or a hole in the ground? But we can change that. We can put this place back together, where it won't be just…

"Shapes," Mae replies, finishing the thought. "I'm going to die down here."

The cultist concludes, "Everything crumbles. Possum Springs bleeds to death, and soon we'll all be dead, and this town will just be fields and trees."

The cultists fundamentally believe, economically and spiritually, that if they just send enough human bodies to their deaths in the mine, then the mine will reward them with happiness, with long lives, and with sturdy, single-family homes. But as Fisher shows us, Capital doesn't work this way. In fact, its central eeriness is in convincing us that it does—that it cares, and that we're at fault if it doesn't. In the end, of course, Mae doesn't die down there. She stops the cult, for now. She keeps herself and her friends alive, for now. Importantly, she doesn't beat Capitalism. But she does make it to the next band practice.

Following Fisher's lead, however, we should ask, what does this experience do to Mae as a person? We've seen how Capital affects Possum Springs, but what does it do—what has it done—to our protagonist? Sure enough, Mae grows and changes over the course of the narrative, as do most protagonists worth their salt. And her journey is this: Mae returns home, is deeply estranged, then finds something of herself—again, perhaps, but maybe for the first time. This is the barest of summaries, but the thematic particulars I've thinly implied are just as fruitful as those that concern the broader, collective and historical, characterization of Possum Springs. Next, we'll look at how the weird and the eerie manifest not in a community, but in the self, to a tragic degree.

CHAPTER THREE

Thomas Wolfe says you can't go home again. Heraclitus says no one steps into the same river twice. These sentiments express a certain kind of weirdness. Once the discrete experience of a place is past, a person's return to it necessarily sees it different, or differently sees it. Has this place changed, or have I? All returns are marked by this alienation. Think of going back to your elementary school—or to the place where your elementary school once stood if, like the author, your elementary school has been demolished. Returns to places are charged with what Fisher calls the "peculiar kind of perturbation" that comprises the weird. He writes, "a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least should not exist here" (*WE*, 15). Fisher introduces the weird as it relates to objects outside ourselves, but there is an especially painful kind of nostalgia that subverts this notion and directs it inward. Namely, there is a nostalgia by which we wonder, upon returning to a place, whether we should have—whether our new impressions have irrevocably damaged our earlier memories. In this way, the weird becomes us.

Mae is a weird alien who transgresses her own reductive and toxic nostalgia. Returning from college to Possum Springs, Mae expects the town to be exactly the way it was when she left. The same trees, the same trains—the same people, doing the same things. Her first words in-game to her father: "Hey! Remember me?" The title card that marks the game's first chapter: "Home Again." Of course, things are different. But things aren't just different because Mae is different—things have changed on their own, without her. Highschool, that fabulous and terrible unifier of teenage angst, is over. With it went

the rigid structure by which friendships were fostered by circumstance. Mae's friends didn't go to college. They've gotten retail jobs or taken up managing the family business, and now they convene for band practice as an excuse to hang out, rather than in pursuit of the next big gig. Moreover, those friendships have evolved in Mae's absence, and they work across social dynamics that Mae (and the player) must learn anew. Likewise, her parents—as comes as an unnerving surprise to many young adults—are newly comfortable expressing their personal anxieties to her: money is tight since her father was laid off, and the church her mother works at isn't doing so well either. Casey Hartley has gone missing.

Inasmuch as Mae assumes Possum Springs to be a constant, she assumes the same of herself. Whereas the former assumption alone would be dangerous, the addition of the latter forms the dramatic backbone of her narrative. Mae becomes weird not just, as discussed above, in an exterior context—but utterly unto herself. She becomes, so to speak, not just a thing that does not belong locally, neither here nor there—but something that essentially and forever *cannot* belong. Mae's solution to this dilemma feeds back into its cause. If she comes home, Mae figures, maybe she isn't really the person she was while she was away. Perhaps she *can* belong, can *learn* to belong, can belong *again*—if only in Possum Springs. However, as she struggles to retrace her steps, Mae ignores an unconscious progress. Every step Mae thinks she's retracing actually leads her forward. "The sense of *wrongness* associated with the weird," Fisher writes, "is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new" (*WE*, 13). Consequently, the infinite newness and novelty of the self is at its weirdest when it comes into contact with that which reminds it of its own past. Mae clings to this weird tension even as it hurts her. Her own rationalization for dropping out of college expresses this.

For most of the game, the player isn't privy to precisely why Mae decided to leave school; but this gap in player-knowledge is the practical result of Mae's own reluctance to talk about it. It's weird that she would, the player can imagine she thinks, *but here she is*. *Here one is*, a sentiment wrong and unsettling in the sense of not being settled where one should be. As a blank space, Mae's decision to drop out is central to the narrative, but not as a revelation waiting to happen. It's more or less clear that Mae left (and is ashamed of leaving) school not because of some singular, secret tragedy, but because of the fear she carries with her throughout the game. Late in the narrative, as she recovers from a penultimate run-in with some of the Black Goat cultists, Mae reclines on a dingy sofa alongside either Gregg or Bea—the punk or the goth, the fox or the gator—depending on which character the player has elected to go on more friend-dates with. During this conversation, Mae struggles to form a coherent explanation for certain episodes in her life characterized by debilitating dissociation. Sometimes, she says, people appear to her like mere assemblages of meaningless patterns and shapes. ("Shapes," she will later say to finish the thought of the cult leader in the mine.) The apparitions of this incomprehensible geometry utterly displace Mae, remove her from her surroundings, and strand her in some unconscionable exterior. They weird her to the world as they weird the world to her.

By this point, via the game's occasional foreshadowing, the player has come to understand that Mae is guilty of some apparently awful incident that no one in town has forgotten and for which many may never forgive her. The local kids tell Mae flat out that their mothers told them not to talk to her. Her own mother obliquely refers to trouble in her past. Partygoers call her a psycho. As Mae drifts into an anxious sleep on the couch, she reveals to her closest friend that she first experienced this dissociation when she was, of all

things, playing a videogame about "dating ghosts or something." One afternoon, Mae says, "suddenly, like, something broke." Her friend asks her to continue. Mae's monologue proceeds:

> It was just like… pixels. The characters onscreen… I felt like I knew them. They weren't people anymore. They were just shapes. And their lines were just things someone had written. They never existed, they never had feelings. They never would exist, either. And it felt so sad, like I'd just lost these real people, and this whole thing we had, it was just… me. Alone. And like that realization like dumped out of the screen and into real life, went outside and the tree out front, I looked at it every day, it was like a friend outside the window, now it was just a thing… just a thing that was there, growing and eating and just being there, like all the stuff I felt about the tree was just in my head, and there was some guy walking by, and he was just shapes, just like this moving bulk of… stuff, and I cried, because nothing was there for me anymore, it was all just stuff. Stuff in the universe, just… dead. And the next day was that softball game, and Andy was the pitcher when I was up, and he was just shapes too, just some lines somebody wrote, like nothing in there, and I was so scared and angry and just… I dunno, before I knew it I was on top of him, smashing his face in with the bat, just shapes, red shapes all over the grass.

Mae reveals that she knew she had to drop out of college when she looked up at the statue of the institution's founder and could see nothing but those same shapes again. The player, at this point, may recall the very first of the game's dream sequences, in which Mae takes a softball bat to the parked cars and trashcans of a neon-surrealist cityscape before

the grotesque clockwork of a huge and looming metal figure crashes down on top of her. She continues:

> I didn't leave my dorm room, I either didn't eat or I ate entire pizzas at once, I downed cough syrup just to sleep all the time, and I finally got up the courage to leave. And I came home. Where everything was fine. Where I knew everyone, and it wasn't just… dead shapes. Watching me. Something broke. In my head. In my life.

The focus of Mae's desperation to return to the community of her youth is not only the result of her own nostalgic anxieties; it is equally the result of her ostracization from that very community. Mae finds herself caught in a bind between proving to herself that she hasn't changed and proving to the town that she has. If she manages the latter, who else would she be? If she manages the former, where else would she go? The narrow space between these two questions makes for a kind of thematic claustrophobia that becomes echoed and amplified by the spatial dimension of Mae's environment and the player's interactions therein. Mae feels trapped in Possum Springs. The player is guided to feel the same way.

Generically speaking, *Night in the Woods* fits the bill of a side-scroller, a kind of two-dimensional game in which the player guides their avatar laterally in front of a particular backdrop, or upon reaching the extreme end of one backdrop, into the space represented by another one. The visual language being employed is somewhat similar to that of the live theatre, namely, the swapping of background set dressings in between scenes to represent different locations. The backdrops of a side-scroller, or "screens" as

they're typically called, can have entrances and exits not just at their boundaries, but in their midst. One building out of several may have an operable door into which the player may enter. A staircase might afford the choice of ascent or descent. Additional entrances or exits therefore can lead to complex concatenations of screens: A leading—in addition to B—to C, for instance, which exits out to D, thereby skipping entirely the traversal of B. Much of the appeal of side-scrollers is precisely this challenge of spatial reckoning. Players need to know not just where to go, but how best to get there. Although *Night in the Woods* doesn't require a massive amount of spatial awareness from its player, the game nonetheless leverages the spatiality of its setting to foster an ever increasingly oppressive and eerie atmosphere over the course of its narrative.

The explorable world of *Night in the Woods* is comprised of about eight major screens of exterior townscape. Among them: the commercial town center, the former underground trolley station, the parking lot behind the old supermarket. Additionally, the player can enter a handful of buildings, like the church and the workplaces of Mae's friends. Since the game progresses one day at a time, the player nearly always starts the day in Mae's bedroom. From there, Mae can walk out of her third-floor room, down the stairs, out of her parents' house, and down the street either to the left or to the right. The Borowski household is located on a residential street near the rightmost boundary of the game's map. Moving to the right, the player finds some woods, a bridge, and the sign marking the city limits of Possum Springs. Attempting to continue rightward, the player provokes Mae to quip that she's not about to walk all the way to the next town over.

Conversely, the player is similarly stymied by moving leftward from Mae's neighborhood, downtown through the various screens of the commercial district, and out

to the chain-link fence that bounds the abandoned parking lot. Here the game's soundtrack fades away, replaced by ambient noise. Wind over leaves, the ethereal crackle of the nearby woods. The game's camera similarly estranges the perspective by framing those woods with greater emphasis, casting Mae, who typically occupies the central real estate of the screen, into the far right of the shot. These woods are unlike the others; they're darker—blue and dead. Not incidentally, it's along this latter borderline that, midway through the game, Mae loses track of the cultist kidnapper she chases down on the night of the Harvest Festival. Mae has no quips for this boundary—only, apparently, a silent dread. In either direction, for the sake of fear or apathy, respectively, Mae—and the player—are stuck. Escape is only ever inward.

Between these boundaries, as the days of Mae's return go by, routines emerge. Mae's computer sits at the ready next to her bed. Because of this, the player is likely to check Mae's chat windows to see what her friends are up to. Early on, Mae's mother calls her over to the kitchen to catch up once Mae gets downstairs. Likewise, the player is liable to check in with her every morning thereafter. On some days, the game's camera reveals when Mr. Chazokov, a friendly neighbor, is out on his roof stargazing. That way, the player knows when Mae can scramble up there herself and join him. Miss Rosa, an elderly friend of Mae's grandfather, tends to be eating breakfast by the pierogi stand nearly every day. It therefore comes as a dreadful surprise when the player arrives to check on her and she isn't there. She returns later. Day in and day out, a routine—routines. Down the stairs, talk to Mom, head into town, walk up to the church, out to the cliffside, chat with Bruce, back into town, down to the trolley station, steal a pretzel, hop back upstairs, go visit Bea…

One day, a Russian expatriate travelling the American countryside stops into town and asks Mae where he might buy some extra supplies for the trail. Mae's speaks frankly and says that the best he can probably hope for is what amounts, in our world, to the local 7-11. The admission is almost heartbreaking. He stands there afterward, as dead-eyed as every other character in the game but looking all the more dejected. Does Mae wish that she, or her town, had something better to offer him? How could she not? In instances like this, the narrative of Mae's own dissatisfaction regarding Possum Springs becomes totally supported by the player's own experience of it. Why is she—anyone—even here?

A gnawing sentiment—this town is dead, really dead—is expressed outright by various characters, but all the more effectively through the motions of play itself. Rather than mere exposition, it becomes a conclusion. Whereas *Night in the Woods* is a comparatively lengthy game for its genre—totaling anywhere from eight to over a dozen hours—the investment of time is meaningful. What ends up amounting to mind-numbing, claustrophobic boredom on the part of the player is not simply the result of a desperate desire to exhaust the experience of this particular videogame, to draw out every drop of marrow from its bones. Rather, the game's boredom exists for the experiential expression of a genuine and particular sentiment. Mae is desperate to find anything to do with herself. So too is the player. Returning to the eerie: something should be here, right? Or perhaps what is here shouldn't be.

In addition to the sensation of the eerie mediated by the exploration of a game world that feels, the more it's explored, ever smaller, there is another facet of eeriness expressed by *Night in the Woods*. As a character, Mae struggles to understand whether she is actually in control of her life. Does she do the things she does because she truly doesn't care, or

because she doesn't know what she cares about? Likewise, the player must struggle with whether their choices have narrative consequences. The two sentiments align. Fisher writes that "behind all of the manifestations of the eerie, the central enigma at its core is the problem of agency" (*WE,* 63). What, if anything, is in control here? What, if anything, do I control? Fisher's eerie is difficult to express without resorting to these rhetorical questions because it is presented fundamentally as an uncertainty. Unlike the far more singular weird, *that which does not belong,* the eerie can be divided into two possibilities: a failure of absence, or a failure of presence (*WE,* 61). Something where there should be nothing, or nothing where there should be something. An absolute distinction between a failure of absence—that is, something where there should be nothing—and the weird notion of that which does not belong is difficult to define. Fisher himself admits to this: "the weird is constituted by a presence" (*WE,* 61). But suffice it to say that the eerie is necessarily a fuzzier concept. It is, by nature (or by Fisher's intention), less clear than its complement.

Night in the Woods most prominently navigates the question of consequence via an eerie approach to dialogue. In traditional adventure games, to which *Night in the Woods* shares a generic lineage, dialogue is more or less a pragmatic issue. It's there to amuse the player with humor or to guide the player to the solution of a puzzle which blocks their progress. "Oh, I, a lowly guard dog, hunger so! Were I to be distracted only momentarily by some nearby morsel, why I might even abandon my post, and let any passing errant sneak across this bridge, in spite of my orders!" The player of the adventure game would then know to be in search of food, or would know, should they come across food by happenstance, where it should be applied. *Night in the Woods* takes much from this generic conceit. Dialogue choices lead to additional information, or provide characters with

excuses to explain themselves and the world in detail. But whereas many traditional adventure games present the player with a list of dialogue options to be exhausted, *Night in the Woods* rarely allows the player this luxury. Dialogue tends to be chosen in response to the previous line such that it wouldn't make much sense for Mae to move the conversation backwards in order to explore more options. This, in itself, is nothing new. More recent adventure games, such as those made by now defunct studio Telltale, ushered in a new era of adventure game dialogue via the imposition of naturalistic time limits on player choices and superficially reactive consequences. Their now memetic refrain: "So-and-so will remember this" (see Kuchera).

Night in the Woods eschews the Telltale solution to the problem of stilted and (for lack of a better term) video-game-y dialogue: the kind that's circular, redundant, and concerned less with characterization than with exposition. *Night in the Woods* wants its player to be stuck in the moment of conversation, rather than looking down from on high on the greyed-out dialogue choices that reflect the percentage of all text they have already read or heard, yet which remain to be heard or read again and again. The game doesn't really want the player to see or hear everything! Conversations naturally have conclusions, but not completions. Moreover, Mae's conversations self-consciously reflect a disaffection for choice, per se, both on her part and on the part of the player. The game rarely puts the player in the position of determining the outcome of a given situation. Indeed, most conversational choices are hardly even coded in relation to the very next few lines of dialogue. Most of the time, it's impossible to tell what Mae or the other character will say next, since dialogue options typically contain only the first few words of a sentence or

phrase. In effect, the player becomes complicit in an eerie problem of agency very much as interpreted by the game's protagonist herself.

Select, for instance, in the final dialogue choice regarding which recent event to bring up at band practice—"When I was in that coma or whatever…" versus "When I was down there last night…"—and one sees Mae spout one monologue or another, very slightly distinct, regarding the importance of maintaining a sense of normalcy in the face of a cruel and often meaningless world. Regardless of the choice made, Mae will nevertheless forget her train of thought midway through, and her friends will rally behind her ultimate, pop-existentialist / punk-hedonist suggestion of "song and pizza." And this is the very last choice of the game! So inconsequential! Put another way, whereas, at the intersection of scripted interaction and player-problem-solving, the protagonist of the typical adventure game asks, in pursuit of the solution to some puzzle, "Can you tell me more about your mother?" *Night in the Woods*, on the contrary, is more than content for its player to work out which of a handful of dialogue fragments might make for the best apology for Mae's far too-late and drunken recollection that Bea's mother had recently passed away. Not that any given selection—here the player intuits Mae's hopelessness—will really make a difference, at this point.

The game most directly comments on its own approach to dialogue during a climactic argument midway through the game. Bea invites Mae to dinner at the apartment she shares with her father, another alligator. He's getting older, and ever since the death of Bea's mother, hasn't figured out what to do with himself. Increasingly, Bea has taken over the management of the family hardware store, leaving her with little time to pursue her own ambitions, such as applying to and attending college. Mae can't understand why Bea

lets her father's business run down her own dreams. Bea—who harbors a secret resentment, the player later learns, both for Mae's casual escape to a university and for her unceremonious rejection of that very escape—argues to Mae that she has certain, unavoidable responsibilities. Bea asserts she lives in a real world with real problems that Mae, in her extended adolescence, doesn't, or can't, understand. After dinner, sitting up in bed, cigarette in her mouth, the alligator fumes: "A lot of times people do the things they do because they can't do anything else!" And subsequently, to the dismay of a player who only wants her to take a step back and try to understand someone else's point for once, a stunned Mae can only stammer: "You always have a choice," or "You can always choose." The choice becomes less of an expression of the player's thoughts and feelings, a mere personality test with bigger budget, and becomes more of an expression of common, human limitation.

In *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, Aubrey Anable describes choices like these, made without direct or impactful consequence, as being "not about picking a particular narrative path, but rather about engagement with the story" (29). They're not narrative choices, but *affective* ones. As such, they're written for the player to understand what's going on in Mae's head, in all its contradiction, and sometimes in direct contrast to what comes out of her mouth. By offering the player a comparatively minimal degree of authority over the dialogue, as well as by openly displaying, rather than disguising these significant restrictions, *Night in the Woods* makes clear its stance role-playing. The game wants players to experience and identify with Mae as she's written, rather than as they would wish for her to be.

The affective choice, in relation to the narrative choice, is the eerier of the two. If a player maintains agency in making a choice, but that choice isn't, or isn't obviously reflected, where does that agency go? Does it disappear? The player runs up against an eerie failure of presence. We have largely learned, as players, to expect the echo of our actions to return to us through games. *Night in the Woods* rarely returns it. And whereas many narrative videogames don't frequently, or at all, reflect player choice, few indeed manage the issue in a manner so indebted to the themes of the work as a whole. The player's desire to make meaningful choices is analogous to Mae's own struggle to mean what she chooses to do. An eerie question pervades: why am I doing this? But *Night in the Woods* has an answer. Not all of the player's choices are quite so immaterial. Those that truly matter, however, do not do so in the ways that most players are primed to expect.

In many role-playing games, the term "sidequest" refers to a kind of optional objective unrelated to the "main quest" which begins and eventually ends the game. Despite not being a traditional role-playing game, *Night in the Woods*, contains a few of what could be considered sidequests. The first has to do with an alcove blocked by cardboard boxes in the attic of the Borowski home. The player can come across this alcove early on, and Mae will comment that perhaps she can convince her father to move the boxes around so that she can check out what might be hidden there. A second sidequest concerns the discovery of a small clan of baby rats living in the carcass of a rotting parade float that the player can discover by scrambling into the window of an unmarked building in the center of town. Their biological progenitor nowhere to be found, the baby rats come to see Mae as a kind of mother figure. In either case, *Night in the Woods* is not explicitly clear on what the player needs to do to see these sidequests through to their endings. However, the

player may discover their mechanisms themselves, by doing exactly what they were likely doing already.

In order to clear the boxes in front of the alcove, the player must periodically converse with Mae's father, who can be found at home watching TV every night after the completion of the day's friend date. Mr. Borowski, the player learns, has recently been laid off from his job. He now works, stoically, for little respect and less pay, in the deli section of the grocery store. While the player can ignore these conversations by heading straight up to Mae's bedroom to sleep, engaging Mae's father every night will eventually prompt him to move the boxes, allowing Mae to find a safe in which her grandfather stored a human tooth. The tooth, the player may recall from a visit to the town's historical society, is a symbol of the old miner's union, dating back to an inspiring incident in which union workers literally knocked the teeth out of one of their bosses, in retaliation for a violent crackdown on their strike. At the end of the game, if the tooth has been discovered, Mae gives the tooth as a gift to her father, in response to his expressed frustration with the deli's management. This scene never occurs unless the player makes sure to check in with Mae's father. In the absence of a routine, there is no payoff.

Likewise, Mae's rat children need to be fed each day with pretzels stolen from the local pierogi vendor who, to his own discredit, instantly and without cause presumes Mae to be a thief. The pretzels secreted into her pocket, Mae can return to the rat nest a provider. For the player who cares to keep to this ritual, the routine provides something of a clear structure day-to-day throughout the game. Steal a pretzel, feed the rats. The loop, and the route by which the player efficiently completes it, become second nature—even cathartic. Although the rats can't perish, the player who doesn't routinely feed them will miss out on

a scene at the end of the game, comparable to the tooth scene explained above. The scene shows Mae reclining in the window of the abandoned grocery store, surrounded by the rats she's raised, the whole horde of them having outgrown decaying float and settled into more permanent accommodations.

It's clear from both of these side-stories that *Night in the Woods* is a game that cares more about what the player chooses to do *over time* than about what the player chooses to do at any given moment. Change, or personal growth, so the argument of the game appears to go, is something that happens through routinization, through the decisions a person makes day after day. Such a journey is recounted even by the in-game interface. As days pass, conversations flow, and events unfold, Mae records into her journal (originally prescribed by her therapist) crudely scribbled sketches of the people and places in her life. Since the player can access this journal at any time by pausing the game, the sketches become legible indications of the development of Mae's character. Moreover, they become reminders that fight back against the terrible eeriness of Mae's world. Sometimes things happen, and sometimes there's something left to remind us that their happenings both involved and affected us.

CHAPTER FOUR

The weird and the eerie account for many of the themes at play in *Night in the Woods*. Economics, alienation, community, friendship. But there remains another thematic throughline in the game that the weird and the eerie, in their fidelity to human experience, can't quite scale up to. In pursuit of these somewhat loftier themes, I devote this final section to a close reading of several of the game's key passages which have not yet been addressed. Nominally, what concerns this final analysis is the game's discussion of meaning and its relationship to meaninglessness. This, too, can be understood as a political question. Mae's struggle, by the end of the game, becomes a question of what, if anything, to hold onto. To her credit, she does produce, for herself, an answer.

During one of her late-game supernatural nightmares, Mae finds herself stranded among the dunes of what appears to be an endless and starlit desert. Wandering, she comes across a figure blotting out the dim light of the horizon. Before her, atop one of the dunes, sits the silhouette of what appears to be an enormous housecat. Two giant eyes, alike in feline shape to Mae's own, glow a brighter blue than any star in the sky. The celestial housecat speaks: "Seconds ago, little creatures are coming, and they ask me if I am God, and I am asking what God is, and they are telling me, and I am not this God, and this God is nowhere."

After a brief back-and-forth, Mae asks the space cat, "So what am I doing here?" The bigger cat responds curtly, "Monstrous existence." Later in the same conversation, it continues the sentiment:

> I will tell you a second thing, there is a hole at the center of everything, and it is always growing, between the stars I am seeing it, it is coming, and you are not escaping, and the universe is forgetting you, and the universe is being forgotten, and there is nothing to remember it, not even the things beyond, and now there is only the hole.

Mae asks, "So… does anything mean anything?"

The big cat responds, "This is not a question worth answering."

The player can voice, through Mae, one line of questioning or another. "What about my home? What about my friends?" Or, alternatively, "What about trees in the fall? What about the leaves?"

Either way, the space cat reiterates, "Soon they are dying, soon they are rotting, you are atoms, and your atoms are not caring if you are existing, your atoms are monstrous existence."

The player has come upon the game's most explicit interrogation of grand theology. The metaphysical issues raised here are less than immediately practicable. But they nonetheless underlie many of the game's more down-to-earth themes. In an inversion of religion's traditional hierarchy, *Night in the Woods* posits that God is something like a synecdochal part of what we call meaning. In other words, God—far from being the infinite metaphysical limit of Truth—becomes just one of innumerable formulations of meaning as it exists, for real people, day to day. The ingame God is neither constant nor given. Nor, for that matter, is any kind of meaning. These are things that must be worked towards, and

moreover, worked towards always in relation to others. As a result, the question of meaning is necessarily a political reckoning. What matters matters politically. Where and how one finds, invents, or shares with others what is meaningful are essential concerns of humankind from which *Night in the Woods* doesn't shy away.

Elsewhere in the game, similar questions are raised by Mae in conversation with one Pastor Karen. Pastor K, as she prefers to be called, is the local church leader for whom Mae's mother works. Throughout the game, Pastor K is seen lobbying the city council to allocate funds for the sheltering of the homeless population of Possum Springs. In this pursuit she is eventually unsuccessful. While the representation of the church of *Night in the Woods* appears intentionally vague—at least with regard to its real-world precedents—two items stand out. First, the church's use of the term "pastor" implies it to be of some Protestant denomination. Second, the fact that the pastor of the church is a woman hints toward political liberalism (by the American definition of center-leftism). Perhaps, in this regard, we note the attempt of the church to appear even a little hip. This isn't your grandad's church! Even if it actually is. The connotation of progressivism seems intentional on the part of the game's writers. By cultural default, we imagine the church, in almost any fictional setting, to be an institution of conservatism—if not of outright corruption. By introducing Pastor K as a woman—and furthermore, as a woman genuinely devoted to liberal social projects—*Night in the Woods* clears some of the air around its audience's assumptions. The player might at least give Pastor K the benefit of the doubt.

Nevertheless, despite her mother's occupation at the church, Mae is less generous. One late-game conversation expounds on the spiritual themes raised above. Approaching the deepest point of her spiritual crisis, Mae turns to Pastor K for advice. She tells the pastor

about her dream of the dunes. “They went on and on about how annoyed they were,” says Mae of the housecat, “that people kept coming to them with questions, and annoyed that anyone thought they were God to begin with.”

Pastor K plays the pragmatist. “Well, I don’t think that was God then,” she replies.

“Why?” Mae asks.

“If something tells you it isn’t God, you should probably believe it,” says Pastor K. (An echo of the spooky comedy classic *Ghostbusters*: “When someone asks you if you’re a god, you say, yes!”)

Mae remains shaken. She’s unsure whether she still believes in anything so much as resembling a loving God. What if whatever is out there—if there’s anything out there—is really just as apathetic and callous as the feline figure in her dream? Pastor K assures her, “If you want the truth, I think everyone doesn’t believe in God, for at least a few minutes a day. [...] Faith is a process, you have to keep getting up and choosing to go on.”

Mae is incredulous. “Do you really think there’s a God?” she asks. “Like, literally someone up there listening? Is that something you completely believe?”

“Hm. I don’t know. On my best days I think I do. But there are times where I don’t,” says Pastor K.

“It’s your *job* to believe.”

“Well, I think it’s more my job to serve others…”

“But you’re lying to people!”

"How?"

"You stand up there and tell people to believe in something you don't 100% believe in yourself."

"Maybe you're right Mae, and maybe I should get up there every week and give some sort of tally of how much I believed that week, but who would that help?"

"But you're a pastor, and you can't tell me whether or not God is up there. Whether anyone is watching, anyone who gives a shit." Mae concludes the conversation: "Then what's the point of you?" Pastor K is left speechless. "I have to go," Mae says, and her control is returned to the player.

What we have come to understand as Mae's internal anxieties are once again externalized by confrontations and conversations like these. Mae is constantly confronted by answers—some bad, some better—to the problem of meaning. Pastor K's preaches a kind of spiritualism: meaning through faith. The space cat preaches a kind of nihilism: utter meaninglessness. Likewise, we recall that the Black Goat cultists preach a kind of pessimism: the unavoidable decay of meaning and everything. These categorizations are reductive, but they move us toward a realization of how *Night in the Woods* answers these provocations. Meaning and meaninglessness, in either direction, mark the outer limits of human thought. This being so, neither the weird nor the eerie—so concerned as they are with the down-right human, affective, and phenomenological experiences they entail—can muster thorough insights into the kind of questions meaning makes us ask. Another mode of inquiry is necessary. In his book *In the Dust of this Planet*, the pessimist philosopher and theorist Eugene Thacker provides one such term: the "horror of philosophy."

Thacker's definition of horror goes like this: "Horror is about the paradoxical thought of the unthinkable" (9). This interpretation dovetails nicely with Fisher's notions of the weird and the eerie. Somewhat surprisingly, it reconciles a disjunction that Fisher alludes to, but never quite explains in detail. Fisher writes that the weird and the eerie are siblings in the categorial strange. "The strange—not the horrific," he notes (*WE*, 8). But here Fisher appears to reduce horror to something it's not. To quote him in full:

> The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we 'enjoy what scares us'. It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread—but it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying. I am not here claiming that the outside is always beneficent. there are more than enough terrors to be found there; but such terrors are not all there is to the outside. (*WE*, 8)

Thacker's notion of the horrific is not, however, so readily reduced to that which "scares us." Instead, it provides something like an extension to the categorical strange. It lends us a vocabulary to discuss the outside of the outside—the stuff so far outside of human thought that it might as well have no relation to whatever we consider an inside. The stuff that isn't even thinkable in the first place. Down in the weeds of his argument, Thacker argues that through horror we come to terms not with the Kantian world-in-itself—the noumenal world that exists apart from our phenomenological perceptions thereof—but instead with a world-without-us, something he describes a negative loophole of thought by which we subtract ourselves from both sides of the metaphysical equation. In contrast to

our everyday World (the subjective world-for-us) and the incomprehensible Earth (the objective world-in-itself), Thacker calls this tertiary world-without-us the "Planet."

As a "negative concept," the world-without-us is described by Thacker as "that which remains 'after' the human" (7). The imagery of apocalyptic fiction illustrates this concept readily enough. Skyscrapers scaled by stubborn ivies. Alligators swimming through the atria of flooded shopping malls. Monuments worn down by roving dust storms. Rather than approaching in vain the Earthly world-in-itself, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction imagines a Planetary world-without-us. "Arguably," Thacker writes, "one of the greatest challenges that philosophy faces today lies in comprehending the world in which we live as both a human *and* a non-human world—and of comprehending this politically" (2). Politically then, we find that the imagination of the non-human is precisely the mode by which *Night in the Woods* interrogates the meaningful violence of Capital. By defamiliarizing Capital into the form of a centralized, albeit apparently infinite, ontological personification of power—"a hole at the center of everything"—*Night in the Woods* both politically and paradoxically reckons with what Thacker calls the idea "*that thought is not human*" (7)—that there are thoughts in the world which aren't ours and therefore can't be comprehended via positivistic inquiry.

It would be insufficient, not to mention misleading, however, to claim that *Night in the Woods* is purely a product of horror. Rather, the game engages with the horrific, but strikes back at it in important ways. As much as *Night in the Woods* is a game about creeps and cultists, it's really a game about ghosts and gods—weird spirits and the eerie ways they affect us as they move among people, that is to say, politically. Through gods, we must confront what meaning means. Through ghosts, we must confront what history means.

Meaning and history are alike in this regard, in their horrific extremity. At the outer limits, they remain off-limits. Indeed, the problem of horror is one of the first things established in the game. In her poem, Mae recalls that her grandfather's last words were, "This house is haunted." But what house? He was, after all, sitting up in a hospital bed. What hauntings? He was, after all, staring out the window.

Mae wagers, in one version of the game's last conversation, that she gets what he must have meant. "This whole… place," she says, meaning life itself. "Everything is extremely bad here right now," she concludes. "Everything is bad in the world." The haunting isn't *particular*. The haunting isn't *somewhere*. The haunting is *everywhere*. *There is a haunting*.

Bea, laconic as ever, chimes in to connect the sentiment to the Black Goat cultists. "Guys last night," Bea says, "they're like ghosts in an old mansion, don't know they're dead, just stalking around killing whoever moves in." Following, we might say that the cultists exist as ignorant proponents of the haunting. Their house is haunted and they don't even know it—much less that they're the ghosts haunting it. In fact, they'll keep on adding ghosts until the end of the world stops them. Mae replies, "Like Granddad said. It's haunted."

It's haunted: like saying, it's raining, it's cold. Mae's grandfather decries life as being *essentially* haunted by bad things. Disasters, deaths, decay. In this regard, the haunting is a form of history that is, itself, meaningful. To remain ignorant of either the existence or the meaningfulness of the haunting is to end up like the Black Goat cultists, forever seeking a tomorrow like the long-dead and ghostly yesterday.

But if this is the situation, if we can't ignore the haunting, because it would be unjust to ignore injustice and suffering; and if we can't get rid of the haunting, because we can't get rid of history; and if we can't even fully comprehend the haunting, because to do so would be to answer the impossible question of what really matters; then what can we do in light of the haunting? The haunting is horrifying! The haunting *is* horror! How do we live with the haunting?

The solution to the haunting provided by *Night in the Woods* distinguishes it from being a work of outright horror. "It's haunted," admits Mae. "But there's also a lot of witches in it. And that makes me feel a tiny bit better." Mae means witches like the three weird goths she meets, who tell her to be on the lookout for three spooky pentagrams—which, to their credit, she eventually does uncover, and by their uncovering feels better. She means witches like her friend Germ's grandmother, who prophecies Mae's future after taking one good look at her. Mae corrects herself, "Not like an actual witch. The teens aren't *real* witches either." Because she also means witches like Lori, a teenage girl who lays metal toys across the railroad tracks and makes monsters out of their train-flattened forms. Even herself, Mae supposes: "I'm like spooky magic all the way." Even Bea. Even, as Bea suggests, the whole of the American Rust Belt!

To be a witch, it would seem, means simply to make do—to get by in the face of it all, in the face of the awful and horrific haunting of life and the world. But the making do of being a witch is particular in that it's devoted to a certain attention to patterns. The teens seek out hidden pentagrams. Germ's grandmother sees something like the future in a face. Lori makes beautiful, subversive monstrosities out of the paradigmatic engines of Capital. Mae keeps putting two and two and two together until she uncovers a sweeping cosmic

conspiracy, operating on a local scale. Witchiness becomes, in essence, a function of pattern recognition—not in a dry, academic, semiotic, and patriarchal sense—but in such a way that life might be sought rather than suffered, lived rather than haunted.

In other words, *Night in the Woods* suggests we work to reconcile the haunting through patterns. What's more, it proposes that this reconciliation is at once vital, essential, and natural. In testament to this assertion, *Night in the Woods* demonstrates a phenomenal obsession with constellations. During one of the game's optional friend dates, Mae and Angus, Gregg's long-term boyfriend, take a trip to a nearby park for a spot of ghost-hunting, in search of one whom they do not yet know is actually a perfectly mortal cultist. Sitting on a bench atop the tallest hill in the park, Angus and Mae start to identify constellations in the starry sky. Angus, the only one of Mae's friends with whom she didn't really grow up, takes the opportunity to open up to Mae. He explains that he was abused as a child by both of his parents. His mother, for instance, would lock him in the pantry for hours, during which time he would try to hone what he hoped would manifest for him as latent psychic powers. When this psychic pubescence never materialized, Angus became disenfranchised with all forms of the supernatural: clairvoyance, telepathy, fate, God. After identifying a constellation of a giant whale, Mae asks Angus frankly, "Do you believe in anything at all?" Angus responds with a characteristic ponderousness:

> Um well so like the constellations, I don't believe there's a whale out there, but I uh believe that the stars exist, and that people put the whale there, like I dunno, we're good at drawing lines through the spaces between stars, like we're pattern-finders, and we'll find patterns, and we like really put our hearts and minds into it,

and even if we don't mean to. So I believe in a universe that doesn't care and people who do.

"Pattern-finders," says Mae. "I feel like a lot of people don't think they found God, but like God found them, like, when they were having bad times like you did."

"God never did," says Angus, "I was completely alone in the pantry, but a few years later, Gregg did. So like, the stars can stay up there and not give a shit about us, but this whale is pretty cool."

The notion of "a universe that doesn't care and people who do" is key. Thematically, it works to counteract the horrific notion of "monstrous existence," that our atoms might care to exist more than we ourselves do. Quite optimistically, *Night in the Woods* refuses to leave off at subtracting the human from the World, as Thacker argues horror does so capably. Maybe the universe is just one big haunting, divided into ghosts. But, if so, what we make of the haunting becomes what we make of the ghosts that comprise it. Life becomes a matter—a mattering—of what lines we draw to connect its parts. Sometimes those lines make a pretty cool whale. So, at least, *Night in the Woods* appears to posit. Other times, the lines are just there to show us that other people are out there making lines.

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